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W400 Writing Narrative Final Draft

The Deconstruction of my Writing Ego

I walked into my first college creative writing class assured by the knowledge that I was an amazing writer. It was during my spring semester of my sophomore year, and I had the idea that I could write any story absolutely flawlessly. This confidence came from my English teachers in high school, who told me (more than once) that I had a natural gift for writing. While I was in high school I entered, and won, a few writing contests, and some of my teachers called my parents and encouraged them to help me get published. Although I may have been ahead of some of my peers while I was in high school, college, I would soon find out, was a different scene altogether. I entered Robert Rebein’s fiction writing class confident that I would impress him and my classmates just as much as I had impressed my high school teachers. I was not prepared for finding out just how wrong I was.

Our first assignment focused on language and form in writing, and we did a series of exercises to help us develop a short story based on what we were studying that week. After a week of writing, we would take turns sharing our draft in a workshop setting with our peers. I volunteered to go first, and posted my story on OnCourse for everyone to review before class. My story was about the changed relationship between a teenage girl and her shell-shocked older brother who has just returned from Vietnam. I had read and re-read the draft before submitting it, confident that it would receive glowing views the next day.

Class began and I waited patiently for Professor Rebein to turn the discussion to my piece. I was asked to read it aloud, which I did with confidence, and then the class began their critique. They began with things they liked about what I wrote.

“I like the dialogue that takes place between the brother and sister,” an older, blonde woman said. “It seems very realistic.”

Another guy, closer to my age said, “I like how descriptive she was in it.”

Most of my other classmates agreed, and the professor also agreed with them. As the comments about the working parts of the piece began to slow, I noticed that no one commented on the actual plot of the story. Then, Professor Rebein said, “What do you think needs work about Paige’s piece?” and more hands flew up than my astonished brain could process.

Professor Rebein’s comments stuck out in my mind the most. “I think if she made it more modern, like have the brother be coming home from Iraq, it would seem more real. This setting, this time frame, there’s just not a lot there that seems authentic. Also, the relationship between the brother and sister needs to be more like siblings. They seem like lovers, which makes the reader wonder,” he said.

He gave me a copy of my paper and on it was a score of two and a half out of four. I was deflated, outraged, and frustrated. I had put so much into this piece and I knew it wasn’t as horrible as he and everyone else said it was. I went to my next class and brooded about my piece, staring at the blue “2.5” on my paper. It seemed to laugh at me. This was the proof that I wasn’t as good as I thought I was.

I began to doubt myself to the point where I was unsure if I ever wanted to write again. I would sit down to complete an assignment only to realize that my enthusiasm for writing was replaced by uncertainty and frustration. I didn’t share with the class as often as I thought I would because I was afraid of the critiques. My writer’s ego was wounded and broken down. I began to believe that everything I was told about my writing talents weren’t true anymore, or worse, were never true in the first place. But finally, Professor Rebein called on me to share my story that focused on dialogue, and I nervously read it aloud. When I finished, I looked up at Professor Rebein to see he was smiling.

“What worked about this piece?” he asked the class.

One of my fellow students raised her hand. “The dialogue is great. It sounds so realistic, like the banter between a real couple.”

“Yes, I completely agree,” the professor said. “Paige does this so well in her piece. There are a few areas that need tweaking as far as the story goes, but the dialogue is done wonderfully in most places.”

After class ended and I saw that Professor Rebein had given me a four out of four on the draft, I could feel my confidence creep back into my writing. I revised the piece and resubmitted it. I began to see the value in the critiques as I took notes on the comments everyone contributed during class. Although this newfound understand began to restore some confidence, I still felt nervous about how to proceed with the final assignment.

Not long after my second revision and submission, Professor Rebein asked us all to sign up for a time to meet with him during his office hours so we could go over our final project for the class. The final project was to pick one of the stories we had written during the semester, flesh it out into a 10-20 page story, and submit it to the class for one last workshop before submitting it to the professor. Professor Rebein wanted to meet with each of us to help us pick out which story we would work on for our final project, and to go over our progress throughout the semester.

When I pushed the number five button on the elevator in Cavanaugh Hall, I could feel my stomach flip with nerves. We hadn’t yet discussed the most recent revision I did of my dialogue story, and I was stuck on how to proceed with it. I didn’t know if I wanted it to be my final project, and I didn’t know if Professor Rebein thought I was capable of completing it. When I knocked on his door and then entered his office, I knew that I should be honest with him. I should tell him about how frustrated I was when I began the class and about how unsure I was now that I had been through the critiques.

“So, how are you doing? What are your questions or concerns?” he asked.

I fidgeted. I had never been to a professor’s office hours before and it had been a while since I felt I could be honest with a teacher. College professors intimidated me, and I had to collect myself before I began. “Well, um…” I stalled, trying to make sure I would phrase it so he wouldn’t be offended, “I feel a little discouraged, frustrated, and inspired.”

He smiled. “Good.”

I looked at the ceiling behind his head as I spoke. “When I started the class I guess I thought I was good, because in high school all my teachers told me I was. But then when we began critiques, I just started to doubt myself.”

“Paige, writing is a process. Writers don’t just write something and get it published instantly. Editors, publishers, agents, and colleagues look at it before it goes to print. Taking criticism is just part of it. Am I saying your high school teachers were wrong? No. They’re supposed to encourage you and inspire you and empower you to excel, especially if it’s in their subject, like English,” he explained. “But this is the next level. Critique makes you a better writer. It makes me a better writer. And you’ve proven that with each revision you’ve submitted so far.”

I hadn’t realized I was holding my breath until that moment, when I finally let it out. “I want to continue with the dialogue story, I think.”

“You should,” he said, pulling a paper off his desk. “Here’s the latest revision with some of my comments.”

We went over the story together, and having him there with me as I explained what I wanted to do with it versus what was already there helped me see my writing more from an audience’s point of view rather than my own. Having a workshop-style writing course with a professor that was able to utilize it successfully helped me see how writing was more than just a gift. Like anything, writing requires work, and part of that is opening my work to others to receive their opinions. I learned to use feedback to my advantage, and by learning to use feedback, I now know how to give it to my students when I teach writing to others. Although I am still nervous when I receive critique on my work, I am able to be thankful for it and use it to make myself a better writer.